

MORAVIAN MUSIC FOUNDATION  
PUBLICATIONS  
No. 1



THE MORAVIAN CONTRIBUTION  
TO AMERICAN MUSIC

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*Reprinted from*  
MUSIC LIBRARY ASSOCIATION



September 1956

THE MORAVIAN MUSIC FOUNDATION, INC.  
WINSTON-SALEM, N. C., 1956



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## THE MORAVIAN CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN MUSIC

By DONALD M. McCORKLE <sup>1</sup>

The quest for lost manuscripts of the world's musical literature has been so thorough in recent years that virtually few collections remain untapped today. As a result of this grand-scale manuscript hunt, the history of European music has had its perspective altered considerably, and the concert repertoire has benefited correspondingly.

Perhaps now is the time, then, to turn our musicological sights to the United States where little has been attempted, and the historical perspective of American music has been altered far less. Through the recent research efforts of several astute American musicologists—particularly Irving Lowens and Allen P. Britton—it has been found that the musical life in America of earlier days was by no means as barren as some of the music historians had suggested. Indeed, it seems that we are now belatedly entering a renaissance of interest in early American music.

One segment of the American population was especially active in things musical during the century 1740-1840: the "Moravians" who established and nurtured model communities in Pennsylvania and North Carolina. These Moravians were members of the renewed branch of the pre-Reformation *Unitas Fratrum* (Unity of Brethren), which in turn was a branch of the Bohemian Brethren. (The Moravian Church in America will join with other Moravians throughout the world in celebrating the Quincentennial of the *Unitas Fratrum* in 1957.)

The music of the Moravian Church in its formative years—termed "Early American Moravian Music" for practical purposes—was distinguished by being of an entirely different character than the music used and created in the non-Moravian settlements in the last quarter of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th centuries. For while New England and the Middle Atlantic States were singing the simple Psalm tunes, and their local artisans were composing the Americanized English fuguing tune, the Moravians were composing elaborate concerted anthems and arias, modeled after the choral works of contemporary Central European composers.

The Moravian contribution to American music is extensive. But like all studies of socio-musicological "contributions," a definitive appraisal of them must be postponed until all research findings are in and have

<sup>1</sup> This paper is the outgrowth of two lectures delivered at meetings of the MLA: "The Moravian Contribution to American Music" (Pittsburgh, February 25, 1956) and "The Musical Moravians of North Carolina" (Miami Beach, June 22, 1956).

been co-ordinated with the facts of early American music in general. Only then will it be possible to place the Moravians and their contributions in the proper perspective in American music. John Tasker Howard, in 1929 (and again in 1954), gave a categorical dismissal of the Moravians and their influence by saying, “. . . the fact that they [the Moravians] were not known very far beyond Bethlehem’s limits prevents the possibility of their exerting any marked influence on our musical life [*Our American Music*, p. 29].” This dismissal was untimely for two reasons: no research had been done on the Moravians at that time (1929), nor had enough been done on the vast field of American music of which he wrote. The present paper incorporates in summary the most recent findings on the Moravians; the contributions enumerated are, therefore, those known at the time of this writing. Undoubtedly many more will become evident as research progresses.

The early American Moravians, like their brethren in Europe, were musical offspring of the European pre-classical movement, and therefore drew their inspiration from the musical lights—the Grauns, the Hasses, the Haydns, the Stamitzes—of the period. It is true that in Europe this heritage reached back several centuries to the age of the great achievements in the polyphonic art, and traversed the musical Baroque until a synthesis was found in the works of Sebastian Bach. And yet it did not absorb any particular stylistic features of the grandiose Baroque: the Thirty Years’ War put an end to any musical tradition the *Unitas Fratrum* may have been nourishing in the 17th century or earlier. The renewed Church initiated a new tradition, and this tradition took root not during the Baroque—even though Bach was still alive and creating some of that age’s greatest testimonials—but during the early years of the pre-classical era which followed.

But the Moravians did not, as one might suspect, avoid all traces of the Baroque when setting up their musical culture. Two remnants in particular, the *Collegium musicum* and the trombone choir, were woven into their musical fabric both in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and in [Winston-] Salem, North Carolina, and to some extent in several of the smaller settlements as well. Each of these performance-media had a distinguished, but unchronicled, existence in America; and each doubtless made a contribution to American music.

### The Trombone Choir<sup>1</sup>

The trombone choir, while admittedly not one of the most significant products of the polyphonic era, became such an integral part of the Moravian tradition that it has continued in some localities to the present-day. The origin of the tradition can be directly traced, of course, to the

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<sup>1</sup> For a highly informative and interesting account of “The Moravian Trombone Choir (Bicentennial of Bethlehem’s Historic Music Ensemble),” see Joseph A. Maurer’s article in *The Historical Review of Berks County* (Reading, Pa.), Oct.-Dec., 1954, p. 2-8.



17th century German *Stadtpipeiffer*, who with other "town pipers," serenaded nearly all of Germany from the church towers and castle ramparts.

The Moravian trombone choirs were arranged in quartets: treble (soprano), alto, tenor, and bass, an ensemble which was unique in America—and, for that matter, even in Europe—in the 18th century. The treble trombone, in particular, was evidently peculiar to the Moravian settlements, since no others of its type were used in the United States.

Trombone choirs were used by the Moravians to announce nearly every public occasion, including weddings, christenings, pageants, funerals, church and community affairs, and were especially revered for their announcement from the church belfries of the dawn of Easter morning. Easter morning services have been one of the most eloquent expressions of the Moravian faith for nearly two-and-a-half centuries, and the trombones have had a central function in them for almost as many years. The Bethlehem Moravians have only recently (1954) observed the Bicentennial of the Trombone Choir of Bethlehem Congregation; the Salem Congregation, on the other hand, allowed the tradition to take a somewhat different course. When other members of the brass family became available in the 1830's, they, along with the woodwinds, were added to the Salem Trombone Choir to create the Moravian Band. Now, a century later, the Moravian Band, an aggregation of over 500 musicians, gathers in Salem Square on Easter morning to sound the announcement of the Resurrection with the same Lutheran-Moravian chorales that have become legendary with the Moravians, and have been heard by hundreds of thousands of Americans since the Brethren first began the practice generations ago.

### *The Collegium Musicum*<sup>1</sup>

When the Moravians transplanted the venerable German *Collegium musicum* to the United States, they did so to have an organization with which to perform both sacred choral works, whether anthems or oratorios, and symphonic and chamber music. They could not have realized, of course—nor would they have been interested in knowing—that their *Collegia musica* would one day be considered a Moravian contribution to American music. Yet a contribution they certainly were, according to these historical precedences: the Bethlehem *Collegium musicum* (1744-ca. 1820) began at a time when its European predecessors were dying out as a result of the dawning era of public concerts—an evolution which abruptly knocked the props out from under the old musical society, removing its *raison d'être* as an important medium for musical performance outside of the pale of the church and the court. The Bethlehem *Collegium musicum*, then, was both the first American *Collegium musicum* and the

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<sup>1</sup> See the author's article, "The *Collegium Musicum Salem*: Its Music, Musicians, and Importance," *North Carolina Historical Review*, October, 1956; abstract in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Spring, 1955, p. 69; and T. M. Finney's "The *Collegium Musicum* at Lititz, Penna., during the 18th Century," in *Papers Read by Members of the American Musicological Society*, 1937, p. 45.

direct successor to the *Collegia musica* of Europe. Three more such groups were organized by the Moravians in America: Lititz (ca. 1765?) and Nazareth (ca. 1780?) in Pennsylvania, and Salem (1780) in North Carolina. Lititz' and Nazareth's operated more or less as appendages of Bethlehem, while Salem's was a fully independent and highly developed organization. The Salem ensemble outlived the other three by nearly fifteen years (to ca. 1835), and as such could probably hold precedence as the last of the Old World *Collegia musica*. It seems clear, at least, that the old amateur society was given a reprieve and allowed to continue its distinguished life for another century under the aegis of the American Moravians.

The performances of the *Collegia musica* in Bethlehem and Salem were highly regarded by all who heard them. The Bethlehem group received the most notoriety because of Bethlehem's proximity to Philadelphia and New York. During the closing years of the 18th century a number of prominent leaders, among them Benjamin Franklin, the Marquis de Lafayette, the Marquis de Chastellux, and General Pulaski, visited the Lehigh Valley community and left testimonials of their esteem for the Moravians and their music. Franklin, in the section of his *Autobiography* written in 1788, spoke enthusiastically of his visit to Bethlehem in 1756: "I was at their Church, where I was entertain'd with good Musick, the Organ being accompanied with Violins, Hautboys, Flutes, Clarinets<sup>1</sup>, &c."; while Chastellux ". . . was astonished with the delicious sounds of an Italian Concerto, but my surprize was still greater on entering a room where the performers turned out to be common workmen of different trades, playing for their amusement . . ." (ca. 1780).

Musical life in Bethlehem did not escape the press in other parts of the nation. A letter from a twelve-year old girl attending the Bethlehem Seminary in 1787 was published in such a distant place as New Haven (*Gazette*, April 17, 1788):<sup>2</sup>

In the apartment where I reside, at the boarding school for Misses, there are about thirty little girls of my age. Here I am taught music, both vocal and instrumental, I play the guitar twice a day—am taught the spinnet and forte-piano; and sometimes I play the organ.

We rise at six, and after combing our heads and washing, we retire for prayers, to a little chapel which is part of this building [Colonial Hall], and which is consecrated to the use of our school. Our morning and evening prayers are playing on our guitars (which we join with our voices) a few religious verses. This chapel no man or boy ever enters. At seven we go to breakfast, at eight school begins, in which we are taught reading and grammar, both English and German, for those

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<sup>1</sup> Many of Franklin's papers had been destroyed during the Revolution, and he was doubtless writing from memory. It seems safe to assume that he had become familiar with the "clarinets" in Paris, rather than Bethlehem, and they slipped into this list of woodwinds inadvertently. Certainly, no other evidence has turned up to indicate that the clarinet was known in Bethlehem as early as 1756.

<sup>2</sup> Irving Lowens, to whom I am indebted for finding this item, appraises it as "really one of the most delightful vignettes describing musical activity in the 18th century I have stumbled upon."

who choose; writing, arithmetic, history, geography, composition, etc. till eleven; when we go into a large chapel, which also joins this house, where there is an organ. Here we see three gentlemen—the person who delivers a short lecture on divinity and morality—the organist, who plays a hymn, in which we join with our voices—and the boys' schoolmaster. In this meeting the boys attend with us. At three quarters after eleven we dine; and at one school begins. In the afternoon we are taught needle-work, tambour [embroidery], drawing, music, etc. till three when school is out, after which we walk, or divert ourselves as we please. At six we sup, then play on some musical instrument, or do as we please, till half after seven, when we retire for evening prayers, at eight we go to bed. We all sleep in a large chamber, with windows on both sides, in which a lamp burns during the whole night. After we are in bed, one of the ladies, with her guitar and voice, serenades us to sleep.

On Sundays divine service is performed in the great chapel, where the whole society, men, women and children meet. Their preaching is sometimes in English and sometimes in German. They sing enchantingly, in which they are joined with the bass-voils [celli], violins and an organ. To call the people into the chapel four French horns [!-trombones?] are blown, with which you would be delighted . . .

The school enjoyed a high reputation generally, and no less a figure than George Washington wrote the Rector twice during 1796 asking that two of his grand nieces, Anna Maria Washington and Mildred Thornton Ball, be accepted. Anna Maria caught consumption before the girls could take up residence, and Washington wrote again in 1797 withdrawing both girls, but his letters show clearly he held the training offered by the school in great esteem. And the situation was altogether the same at the Salem Boarding School, where many socially prominent girls, including the later Mrs. "Stonewall" Jackson and Mrs. James K. Polk, were brought into contact with the Moravian musical culture.

### Musical Instruments

A major contribution of the Moravians to American music was in the musical instruments used by the *Collegia musica*. Many of these instruments, whether organs, strings, woodwinds, or brasses, were among the earliest to be used either for sacred or secular music in America. The first of them, several French (or more correctly, hunting-) horns, were brought to the short-lived Moravian settlement in Georgia around 1735; Bethlehem by 1742 possessed flutes, violins, *violas da braccio* and *gamba*, and horns. During the following decade they received a clavichord (still preserved), the first trombones for the Trombone Choir, and the first organ (1746). Salem, coming into existence a quarter-century after Bethlehem, wasted little time in acquiring instruments of its own: trombones and horns came first, after which the strings and woodwinds.<sup>1</sup> Toward 1800, or shortly thereafter, the *Collegia musica* at Bethlehem, Lititz, and Salem came into possession of some typically Baroque instruments—the *Zinken*, or *cornetti*, and the *viola da gamba*—that had dropped out of wide use in Europe nearly a century earlier. A larger member of the *Zink* family, the serpent, also made its appearance in the same Mora-

<sup>1</sup> For a description of the Salem instruments still extant, see the author's illustrated article, "Musical Instruments of the Moravians in North Carolina," in *The American-German Review*, Feb.-Mar., 1955, p. 12-17.



vian communities in the same era, but the serpent does not offer the same touch of anachronism since it could be found in use abroad down to 1850, whereas the smaller cornetts (to use the familiar English term for the instrument) had been rapidly superseded by the French oboe upon its introduction. Just why the Moravians would have been interested in using such an outdated instrument is not known. Nor is it known why a European Moravian, H. G. Gütter, would have been making them as late as 1804! The *viola da gamba* was an instrument of considerably greater importance than the *Zink*; it had behind it a monumental heritage of great musical literature from the masters of both the Renaissance and the Baroque. Then why would a *gamba* be in use among the Moravians, whose musical fabric was woven as a thinner texture from the threads of the Rococo, rather than from the cords of the Baroque? Again there is no answer so far as the *gamba* is concerned; the answer is found, however, in the way the instrument was used: as an *ersatz* 'cello. One such mongrel was found by the author in 1955: it had obviously belonged to Moravians in one of Salem's adjacent communities (Bethania) as early as 1800, and probably had had its origin in Italy a century before (if our stylistic analysis is correct). From all indications it seems to be the earliest instrument extant that was actively used in America.

Another interesting instrument, although of later (*ca.* 1770?) vintage, is the keyboard instrument at Nazareth which bears features of both the upright harpsichord (*clavicitherium*) and the upright piano (*Giraffenklavier*), and yet defies characterization as either. In essence it seems to be a combination of both harpsichord and early piano, with a trace of clavichord as well. In all probability it is a product of Pennsylvania ingenuity, rather than an import from Europe.

And the Pennsylvania Moravians did indeed have ingenuity. The Pennsylvania-born Moravian John Antes,<sup>1</sup> before his departure for Europe in 1764, made a trio of stringed instruments: a violin (1759), and a viola and 'cello (1764). The violin, the only one of the trio extant (in the Moravian Historical Society Museum), is probably the first violin made in America. Its recent concert debut showed it to be able to do artistic justice to Bach's unaccompanied *Allemande* from the *Partita No. 2 in D minor*. A local artisan from the neighboring settlement of Christianspring, Azariah Smith by name, also made a viola (1765); while two men in Salem, John Vogler and Karsten Petersen, each made a violin; but none of these compare in craftsmanship to those of Antes.

Heinrich Gottlob Gütter (1797-1847), on the other hand, came to America in the 1820's to settle at Bethlehem as an instrument maker and music dealer. The products of his craft, mostly clarinets, flutes, string basses, and so forth, evidently found a place in the musical life of many

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<sup>1</sup> See the author's monograph, "John Antes, 'American Dilettante'," in *The Musical Quarterly*, October, 1956; abstract in *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Fall, 1955, p. 225.

localities—Moravian and non-Moravian—in the early 19th century. The instruments he was not able to make himself, he ordered from his famous family in Markneukirchen, a center of instrument making in Europe.

But all of these instruments we have enumerated were only of secondary importance to instrument making as practiced by the Moravians. Their distinctive contribution lay instead in the field of organ building. The Moravians were in all probability more organ conscious than any other single Christian denomination in contemporary America. True, they were preceded by the Anglicans who already had organs at King's Chapel, Boston (1713); Bruton Parish Church, Williamsburg; St. Philip's, Charleston (1728)—where the younger Pachelbell had been organist; the Wissahickon Mystics at Pennsylvania (*ca.* 1694-*ca.* 1703); the Ephrata Cloister; the Swedish Lutherans, especially in Philadelphia; and the Roman Catholics, who had several churches with organs in the 18th century. But these were famous exceptions to the rule. By and large, the organ had little place in 18th century American church music, and even as late as 1800 the Puritan epithet for the organ—"an ungodly kist [chest] o' whistles"—still had a familiar ring to it. (It is to be hoped that future research on the history of American organs, if undertaken, will bring forth facts to contradict this assertion; but for the present, at least, this is the sum of our knowledge.)

The first organ ordered by the Moravians was built in 1746 by Mons Gustavus Hesselius, a Swedish organ builder of Philadelphia, who for nearly a decade (1743-50) was a member of the Philadelphia Moravian Congregation. This instrument was installed in the chapel of the Bethlehem Congregation House by his foreman, Johann Gottlob Klemm. According to tradition this organ is the same one recently restored and now preserved in the Moravian Historical Society Museum at Nazareth.<sup>1</sup> Klemm, himself, was an organ builder who had received some training in his craft from one of the finest of the European craftsmen, Andreas Silbermann of Dresden. Klemm's partner, who succeeded him after his death in 1762, was David Tannenberg, a joiner who had come to Bethlehem from Saxony in 1749.

It was Tannenberg, then, who developed into the finest and most prolific of the American Moravian organ builders, and whose contribution to American music in the late 18th and early 19th centuries was undoubtedly the most noticeable. From his factory in Lititz he turned out no fewer

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<sup>1</sup> But the author, for one, does not believe it is the same instrument. Stylistically the organ there is of a later period: its fluted pilasters and broken pediment are definitely Chippendale of 1760-80, and the high percentage of tin in the pewter pipes clearly points to the influence of Silbermann—which probably was unknown to Hesselius, but which is evident in the works of Tannenberg. Furthermore, the "Hesselius" organ is remarkably similar in both appearance and construction to the Tannenberg instrument at Graceham, Md.—vintage 1793! The conclusion, then, would be that the original 1746 organ is lost, and the one remaining in its place is another opus of Tannenberg.

than thirty-two organs and an unrecorded number of pianos, harpsichords, and clavichords. His organs were used by Moravians, Lutherans, German Reformed, and Roman Catholics in Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina at a time when the organ—let alone the organ builder—was far from being of fundamental importance to music in America. A number of his organs continued in use until well into the 20th century, and several of them, instead of being entirely replaced, were incorporated into their successors where they remain as a living testimonial to the exquisite craftsmanship of this German-American pioneer organ builder.

Another, and hitherto unknown-organ maker, was Tannenberg's pupil, Joseph Bulitschek of Bethania, North Carolina, who was a cabinet maker and wheelwright by trade. His two instruments, built for Salem (1772) and Bethania (1773), did not exhibit the skill of his teacher's hand, but did have sufficiently high quality to enable them to be used for many years. The Bethania organ was in continuous service until the Church burned in 1942!

The three principal Moravian organ builders—Klemm, Tannenberg, and Bulitschek—apparently continued the tradition inherited by Klemm from Silbermann. If this fact is proven to be correct, then the potential avenues for research in the relationship between European and American Baroque organs are many, and the results would probably disclose a number of rather interesting and significant details heretofore unknown.

#### Moravian Music: Sacred and Secular

For the most significant Moravian contribution to American music we must return to the music itself, which was, as we stated a moment ago, of a different character than that used and composed in any other American community. Being of Central European rather than English influence, the American Moravian anthems and arias were conceived as extended, concerted compositions encompassing all the stylistic traits of the pre-classical schools of Europe: Mannheim, Berlin, Vienna, Dresden, Prague, and Italy. Beginning with the works of Jeremias Dencke (1725-1795), who wrote the first orchestrally accompanied sacred music in America, the Moravian tradition developed during the 18th century with Johann Friedrich (John Frederik) Peter (1746-1813), his brother Simon (1743-1819), Johannes Herbst (1735-1812), Georg Gottfried Müller (1762-1821), and David Moritz Michael (1751-1827), and concluded in the 19th century with Peter Wollé (1792-1871), John Christian Bechler (1784-1857), and Francis Florentine Hagen (1815-1907).

The sacred compositions of these composers and of their European colleagues are preserved in collections at Winston-Salem and at Bethlehem—both of which are now under exclusive trusteeship of The Moravian Music Foundation, Inc. It is not possible at this time to give any exact figure for the number of pieces in these collections; it does appear, however, that when the cataloging is completed in several years, the total



number will approach 6000. Included in the collections are manuscript copies of nearly a hundred large choral works, oratorios, and cantatas, by many prominent European masters. A number of these works, like Haydn's *The Creation*, received their première American performances by the Moravian *Collegia musica*.

Unfortunately for the history of American music, very little of this enormous quantity of music ever entered the stream of musical life in the United States. Only one piece seems to have become well known at all: this piece is the ever-popular "Hosanna" by the German Moravian Bishop Christian Gregor. But well known it must have been indeed. It first appeared in the *Stoughton Collection of Church Music* (Boston, 1831), taking its place beside such favorite American compositions as those by William Billings, Oliver Holden, and Lowell Mason. Irving Lowens has also found it in the 24th edition of Lowell and T. B. Mason's *The Sacred Harp* (Boston, ca. 1841). Another Gregor anthem, "Glory to God" (*Ehre sey Gott in der Höhe*), was published even earlier in an American tunebook: *Ancient & Modern Music, Selected for the Use of the Catholic Church* (Baltimore, ca. 1818-1828).

The Moravian *Collegia musica* by no means neglected the secular side of the musical art. Included in their libraries are more than 1000 compositions—both chamber and orchestra music—by several hundred European and American composers. In the center, so far as the American historian is concerned, are the six quintets—the "Salem Quintets"—of Johann Friedrich Peter, which are the earliest examples of chamber music composed in America (1789), and are further distinguished by their quality as first-class representatives of the pre-classical idiom. Their sister works, the three string trios of John Antes, although composed in Egypt, are the first chamber pieces by a native-born American (ca. 1779-81).

But the music which forms the basis of the extensive collection owned by the *Collegia musica* in Bethlehem, Lititz, and Salem is perhaps of greater interest to the music world at large than are the relatively few indigenous Moravian chamber compositions. The music included in this category comprises works of not only illustrious names—Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Philipp Emanuel Bach, Hasse, Graun—but more significantly of many lesser luminaries of the period—J. C. F. Bach, Johann Ernst Bach, Gyrowetz, Wanhall, and Touchmolin—many of whose works have disappeared into oblivion. Only recently the Peter copy (1766) of Haydn's Symphony No. 17 has been authenticated by both Anthony van Hoboken and Jan LaRue as the earliest existing copy of the work. Six works of J. C. F. (the "Bückeburg") Bach are of greater value, according to Karl Geiringer,<sup>1</sup> since they are the only existing copies of works previously unknown. And the same is true of a *sinfonia* by Johann Ernst Bach and of three *sinfonias* by Josef Riepel.

<sup>1</sup> In "Unbeachtete Kompositionen des Bückeburger Bach," in *Wilhelm Fischer Festschrift*, 1956, p. 104-107.



From the foregoing testimony rests the case of the Moravians and their contribution to American music. If by contribution, one means only the amount of influence exerted in the direction of American music in general, then the Moravians would qualify only through their instruments and the secondary influence of their *Collegia musica*. If, on the other hand, one considers a contribution to be inclusive enough to encompass all distinctive features of a musical culture, then the Moravians would have made a contribution through all of their firsts: first American *Collegia musica* (and last), first performances of major oratorios and symphonic works in America, first instruments in America, first chamber music written in America, first chamber music by a native American, and so on *ad infinitum* . . .

If, however, the jury does not feel that the contribution of the Moravians to American music was made adequately enough during the height of their creative period, perhaps they will be pleased with the plans of the Moravians of the 20th century. The Moravian Music Foundation, Inc., was chartered by the Moravian Church in America in 1956 to advance the knowledge and appreciation of "Early American Moravian Music," and to thereby enable it to gain its rightful place in the American heritage. Immediate plans of the Foundation include promotion of research and publication of the more valuable music from the several large collections, most of which has never previously been published. While the major part of the editions of music will bear the commercial labels of the leading publishers, the Moravian Music Foundation will be responsible for the authoritative editorship of each work. Important compositions, whose value is greater to the scholar than to the trade, will be published in a limited edition under auspices of the Foundation, and will be entitled *Moravian Archives Music*. Through this method, it is hoped, the Moravian contribution to American music will be more than evident in the 20th century, and the historical perspective of early American music will have been adjusted to include one of the most vital of all its segments.

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